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ABSTRACT

This guide contains a brief history of the Internet and explains how to connect to the Internet. It then lists Internet addresses of national organizations, federal agencies, and foundations that provide information on children's issues such as disabilities, child abuse, health issues, legislation, and funding opportunities. (CR)

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The Internet: A Resource for Respite Providers

What is the Internet?

The Internet is a vast, worldwide network of linked computers. In recent years, it has come to be identified with the idea of an "information superhighway," the equivalent in the realm of communications of the network of high speed roads which was created in the U.S. in the years after World War II. It is expected that the information superhighway will affect American society just as profoundly as the interstate highway system did. While the Internet is not yet the communications superhighway that Vice President Gore, among others, has spoken about, it seems to be developing in that direction with astonishing speed.

For respite and crisis service providers, the Internet is an attractive tool which offers access to funders (foundations and corporate grant makers), rapid communications, in the form of e-mail and online discussion groups (and the potential for free, long distance telephone service), and instant access to information from resources that may be located anywhere in the world. On the Internet, Sydney, Australia, is as accessible as Kansas City, Missouri, and Bucharest is as close as Buffalo. Unlike the telephone network, there are no long distance charges on the Internet. In fact, a person may move about from site to site on the Internet and be completely unaware that they are continent hopping in the process.

History

The Internet began in 1969 as a Department of Defense project to test the idea of connecting computers over long distances and maintaining communications between them under wartime conditions. Although only four computers were linked together initially, by 1972 fifty universities and research facilities involved in military projects were part of what was then called ARPANET. This network, and a number of others which were developed later, were joined together in 1991 as the National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET). The ban on business transactions was lifted in 1991, paving the way for the commercialization which has led to the current explosive growth of the net. Today the Internet is no longer a government project. In over forty countries around the world, similar networks are now linked together in the Internet.

The recent upsurge in Internet use has come about because of what is called the World Wide Web. Originally, networked computers exchanged data in the form of numbers, text, or program code. The World Wide Web provides a graphical interface for the exchange of data on the Internet, similar to the way Microsoft Windows adds a graphical interface to DOS on the personal computer. The Web brings the familiar "point and click" personal computing metaphor to the Internet, shielding the user from the complexities of the underlying network structure. Although the older ways of exchanging data over the network remain in use (file transfer protocols and directories of files such as FTP, WAIS, Archie, and Veronica) the vast majority of new Internet users are accessing the network through the Web.

Available Resources

Instant Access to Information

There is so much information available over the Internet that whatever you are looking for is probably available, and more is being added every day. Respite and crisis providers looking for information should check the following sources first:

ARCH National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care Services

Web Address: http://chtop.com/archbroc.htm

Many ARCH Factsheets can be downloaded free of charge from this site. A complete list of ARCH's printed and video products is available with prices and ordering information. ARCH also intends to post other respite news on its site.

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National Respite Locator Service

Web Address: http://chtop.com/locator.htm

Instant access to contact information for 1,400 programs, in all fifty states and Puerto Rico. Programs are listed alphabetically by state and city. A great resource for parents and professionals alike.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Web Address: http://www.os.dhhs.gov/

This site has news, public affairs, consumer, and policy information relating to DHHS. Consumer information on numerous topics including AIDS, child abuse, smoking, etc. Also, numerous links to government databases of information on HHS-related topics.

AskERIC

Web Address: http://ericir.syr.edu

ERIC is a federally-funded national information system that provides, through its sixteen subject-specific clearinghouses, associated adjunct clearinghouses, and support components, a variety of services and products on a broad range of education-related issues. It has three major components: AskERIC Q&A Service; AskERIC Virtual Library; and AskERIC R&D.

HandsNet

Web Address: http://www.handsnet.org

HandsNet is a national, nonprofit organization that promotes information sharing, cross-sector collaboration and advocacy among individuals and organizations working on a broad range of public interest issues. The site has selections of "action alerts," a "weekly digest" of news, "Welfare Watch," and links to websites of HandsNet members.

Child Welfare League of America

Web Address: http://www.handsnet.org/cwla/

This site has a publications list, upcoming conferences and trainings, public policy and advocacy initiatives, and information about consultation services, plus a list of links to member agencies.

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information

Web Address: http://www.calib.com/nccanch/

The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (NCCAN Clearinghouse), a national resource for professionals seeking information on the prevention, identification, and treatment of child abuse and neglect. The site has a listing of new products and initiatives, an online catalog of publications, information on statistics, child welfare, child abuse and neglect prevention, and state statutes, as well as a conference calendar.

Children's Defense Fund

Web Address: http://www.tmn.com/cdf/

This site has a handy list of facts and figures about children's issues, a list of publications, updates and alerts about legislation. The CDF is a private non-profit which doesn't accept government funds, and which pays particular attention to the needs of poor, minority, and disabled children.

Family Resource Information, Education, and Network Development Services

Web Address: http://www.unc.edu/depts/ssw/ntap2/ntap2.htm

FRIENDS offers a range of services designed to assist states, Tribal organizations, and local programs throughout the United States in the development of family resource programs and networks. The site offers a conference calendar, an extensive booklist, and numerous family support fact sheets which can be downloaded.

Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet

Web Address: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.html

The place to go to find all the bills before congress, the current activities of both House and Senate, historical documents, information on committees, and the text of the Congressional Record. It features handy summaries of bills as well as their complete texts.

Federal Register

Web Address: http://www.gpo.ucop.edu/

The text of the *Federal Register* is available from the University of California's GPO Gate, which is designed to help citizens easily access the laws, regulations, reports, data, and other information provided through the Government Printing Office's Access system.

In addition, the catalogues of most university and large public libraries are available on line, as well as the offerings of many bookstores and commercial publishers.

Access to Funders

Many private foundations, corporate grant makers, community foundations, and regional associations of grant makers have a "presence" on the Internet; these sites can be searched for funding opportunities:

Carnegie Corporation of New York
http://www.carnegie.org

American Express Company
http://www.americanexpress.com/corp/philanthropy

Council of Michigan Foundations
http://www.novagate.com/~cmf

E-mail

E-mail is available to social service professionals through a number of channels. Large agencies may have local area networks with e-mail capabilities, as do many hospitals and state agencies. For those who are not connected to such a network, an Internet service provider (or an online service such as America Online, Prodigy, or Compuserve) usually offers e-mail as well as access to the World Wide Web.

E-mail has the same capability for quick exchange of information that a fax machine offers, but with additional advantages: e-mail messages can be cut and pasted into a word processing file, which avoids the problem of scanning, or retyping, information that has been sent by a copy process like faxing. The instant reusability of the e-mail message means that e-mail will probably completely replace the fax in the not-too-distant future. In addition, e-mail messages are stored on a computer until they are read on the computer screen. An e-mail message will not be missed because your fax machine has run out of paper! E-mail can be sent to a distant state or a foreign country very cheaply compared to the cost of sending a fax over a telephone line.

Long Distance Phone Service

Voice conversations over the Internet are now possible, although the technology is in its infancy. Nevertheless, the lure of long distance telephone connections via the computer without long distance telephone charges is powerful. Service is restricted to those who have the necessary hardware and software installed on their computers.

What You Need to Connect

In order to connect to, or "log onto," the World Wide Web, you need a computer (a 486 with 8 megabytes of RAM) with a modem (at least 14,400 baud, and 28,800 is recommended), Windows 3.1 or higher, and software for displaying Web documents called a "browser." Browser software is changing very rapidly, but the programs from Microsoft (*Internet Explorer*) and Netscape (*Navigator*) are the most popular. The commercial online services, America Online, Prodigy, Compuserve, etc., supply their own browsers to their customers. For those programs which already have a suitable computer, the purchase of a fax/ modem ($70 to $200) may be the only additional equipment cost.

The "home page" of the National Respite Locator Service as it appears when displayed in the Netscape Navigator 3.0 browser software. Note the six rectangular buttons above the ARCH logo: "Net Search" is fourth from the left. The names of the states on this screen are underlined in blue; this means that these words are "linked" to other pages on the Internet which can be "visited" by clicking on the link with the mouse.

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If you are not connected to a network already, you will need to establish an account with an online service or an independent service provider (ISP). The service provider, which could be your long distance telephone company, will give you a telephone number to use to establish a "dial up" connection to the Internet via your modem. If you are in or near a metropolitan area, you will probably be able to dial a local number to establish your connection and thus avoid paying telephone charges for the time spent browsing or "surfing" the Internet. In an area where you must make a toll, or long distance, call to reach your service provider, you may have to limit the time you spend online. Monthly charges for unlimited access to the Internet are modest ($15 to $30 per month); some providers are offering more limited access for even less.

Finding What You Need

Once you are connected to the Internet, you can use the various search programs to locate what you are looking for. On the popular Netscape Navigator browser, there is a button at the top of the screen labeled "Net Search" which will connect you to the web "search engines," software programs which can display directories of web sites organized by topic. The search engines also allow you to enter a "key word" or term you want to find information about, and will then display all the sites where this term is used, which may be in the hundreds of thousands, or more! Fortunately, there are various techniques available to narrow the range of your search, but the size of the Internet does make searching a formidable problem at times. Often a site will be linked to other sites which offer similar information. By following the links between sites, your effort can be considerably reduced.

Summary

The Internet is a powerful communication tool for respite providers, and a nearly inexhaustible source of information. This factsheet has not attempted to indicate the full range of what is available on line. For example, *The Washington Post*, CNN, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *USA Today* and a host of other sources of local, national, and international news are instantly accessible. Retailers and manufacturers of all kinds are establishing web sites, including, of course, those offering adaptive devices and products aimed at persons with disabilities. The major advocacy groups concerned with disabilities, child abuse and neglect, and family preservation and support are all well represented, as are the foundations and organizations which fund projects in these areas.

Looking ahead, the Internet appears to be the focal point for the much talked about convergence of the telephone, television, and personal computer into a single device which will be available in every home and work place. The major technology providers in the areas of computers and telecommunications are all racing to make their products capable of sending and receiving live video from one computer to another. Social service professionals need to monitor these developments so that they can exploit their possibilities for training, collaboration with other agencies, networking and exchange of information, evaluation and research, funding, and continuing education.

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